

The background of the book cover is a light blue color with a pattern of interlocking puzzle pieces. Some pieces are solid blue, while others are just white outlines. The puzzle pieces are arranged in a way that suggests a complex, interconnected system.

MASTER
of LIFE and
DEATH

ROBERT
SILVERBERG

ROSETTABOOKS™

MASTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

ROBERT SILVERBERG

Master Of Life And Death

Copyright © 1957 by Robert Silverberg

Cover art and eForeword to the electronic edition copyright © 2002 by RosettaBooks, LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

For information address Editor@RosettaBooks.com

First electronic edition published 2002 by RosettaBooks LLC, New York.

ISBN 0-7953-0562-1



Contents

eForeword

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

About this Title

eForeword

Roy Walton, temporary head of the Bureau of Population Equalization, has suddenly become the master of life and death on a severely overpopulated Earth in the 23rd century. By his judgement alone, people will be displaced, families separated, communities broken to occupy the little open space remaining. The solution must be the stars, and the potential colony planet of Dirna. But Dirna's aliens fear human aggressiveness and resist colonization. And then - a desperate complication - a scientist has found an immortality serum whose distribution will compound human misery. Robert Silverberg's suspenseful and complicated novel, written in 1957 when he was only 22, traces these conflicting themes as they meet and determine the surprising conclusion in an early and enormously ambitious novel. Silverberg had just won (in 1956) the Hugo Award for most promising new writer.

Robert Silverberg (1935 -) is the most prolific, among the most important and, arguably, the finest stylist ever produced by the field of science fiction. He is the author of hundreds of science fiction short stories and close to a hundred novels. He has won four Hugo and five Nebula Awards, was the Guest of Honor at the 1970 World SF Convention (the youngest Guest of Honor then or since) and his production, 45 years after the sale of his first novel, REVOLT ON ALPHA C, he remains extremely productive and influential. Among his best-known novels are SHADRACH IN THE FURNACE, DYING INSIDE, THE BOOK OF SKULLS, LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE, THORNS, MASKS, THE MAN IN THE MAZE, THE SECOND TRIP and the series of Majipoor Chronicles sequelizing LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE. PASSENGERS, BORN WITH THE DEAD, SAILING TO BYZANTIUM and GOOD NEWS FROM THE VATICAN are winners of the Nebula Award in shorter categories;

DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH won the Nebula for best novel in 1972. Silverberg has also written YA and adult fiction and novels in all the genres and has been the editor of many anthologies including THE SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME (1971) and the bestselling LEGENDS (1998)

RosettaBooks is the leading publisher dedicated exclusively to electronic editions of great works of fiction and non-fiction that reflect our world. RosettaBooks is a committed e-publisher, maximizing the resources of the Web in opening a fresh dimension in the reading experience. In this electronic reading environment, each RosettaBook will enhance the experience through The RosettaBooks Connection. This gateway instantly delivers to the reader the opportunity to learn more about the title, the author, the content and the context of each work, using the full resources of the Web.

To experience The RosettaBooks Connection for Master Of Life And Death:

www.RosettaBooks.com/MasterOfLifeAndDeath

For Antigone —
Who Thinks We're Property

Chapter 1

THE OFFICES of the Bureau of Population Equalization, vulgarly known as Popeek, were located on the twentieth through twenty-ninth floors of the Cullen Building, a hundred-story monstrosity typical of twenty-second-century neo-Victorian at its overdecorated worst. Roy Walton, Popeek's assistant administrator, had to apologize to himself each morning as he entered the hideous place.

Since taking the job, he had managed to redecorate his own office on the twenty-eighth floor, immediately below Director FitzMaugham's — but that had created only one minor oasis in the esthetically repugnant building. It couldn't be helped, though; Popeek was unpopular, though necessary; and like the public hangman of some centuries earlier, the Bureau did not rate attractive quarters.

So Walton had removed some of the iridescent chrome scalloping that trimmed the walls, replaced the sash windows with opaquers, and changed the massive ceiling fixture to more subtle electroluminescents. But the mark of the last century was stamped irrevocably on both building and office.

Which was as it should be, Walton had finally realized. It was the last century's foolishness that had made Popeek necessary, after all.

His desk was piled high with reports, and more kept arriving via pneumochute every minute. The job of assistant administrator was a thankless one, he thought; as much responsibility as Director FitzMaugham, and half the pay.

He lifted a report from one eyebrow-high stack, smoothed the crinkly paper carefully, and read it.

It was a despatch from Horrocks, the Popeek agent currently on duty in Patagonia. It was dated *4 June, 2232* six days before, and after a long and rambling prologue in the usual Horrocks manner it went on to say, *Population density remains low here: 17.3 per square mile far below optimum. Looks like a prime candidate for equalization.*

Walton agreed. He reached for his voicewrite and said sharply, "Memo from Assistant Administrator Walton, re equalization of ..." He paused, picking a trouble-spot at random, "... central Belgium. Will the section chief in charge of this area please consider the advisability of transferring population excess to fertile areas in Patagonia? Recommendation: establishment of industries in latter region, to ease transition."

He shut his eyes, dug his thumbs into them until bright flares of light shot across his eyeballs, and refused to let himself be bothered by the multiple problems involved in dumping several hundred thousand Belgians into Patagonia. He forced himself to cling to one of Director FitzMaugham's oft-repeated maxims: *If you want to stay sane, think of these people as pawns in a chess game — not as human beings.*

Walton sighed. This was the biggest chess problem in the history of humanity, and the way it looked now, all the solutions led to checkmate in a century or less. They could keep equalizing population only so long, shifting like loggers riding logs in a rushing river, before trouble came.

There was another matter to be attended to now. He picked up the voicewrite again. "Memo from the assistant administrator, re establishment of new policy on reports from local agents: hire a staff of three clever girls to make a précis of each report, eliminating irrelevant data."

It was a basic step, one that should have been taken long ago. Now, with three feet of reports stacked on his desk, it was

mandatory. One of the troubles with Popeek was its newness; it had been established so suddenly that most of its procedures were still in the formative stage.

He took another report from the heap. This one was the data sheet of the Zurich Euthanasia Center, and he gave it a cursory scanning. During the past week, eleven substandard children and twenty-three substandard adults had been sent on to Happysleep.

That was the grimmest form of population equalization. Walton initialed the report, earmarked it for files, and dumped it in the pneumochute.

The annunciator chimed.

"I'm busy," Walton said immediately.

"There's a Mr. Prior to see you," the annunciator's calm voice said. "He insists it's an emergency."

"Tell Mr. Prior I can't see anyone for at least three hours." Walton stared gloomily at the growing pile of paper on his desk. "Tell him he can have ten minutes with me at — oh, say, 1300."

Walton heard an angry male voice muttering something in the outer office, and then the annunciator said, "He insists he must see you immediately in reference to a Happysleep commitment."

"Commitments are irrevocable," Walton said heavily. The last thing in the world he wanted was to see a man whose child or parent had just been committed. "Tell Mr. Prior I can't see him at all."

Walton found his fingers trembling; he clamped them tight to the edge of his desk to steady himself. It was all right sitting up here in this ugly building and initialing commitment papers, but actually to see one of those people and try to convince him of the need —

The door burst open.

A tall, dark-haired man in an open jacket came rushing through and paused dramatically just over the threshold. Immediately behind him came three unsmiling men in the gray silk-sheen uniforms of security. They carried drawn needlers.

“Are you Administrator Walton?” the big man asked, in an astonishingly deep, rich voice. “I have to see you. I’m Lyle Prior.”

The three security men caught up and swarmed all over Prior. One of them turned apologetically to Walton. “We’re terribly sorry about this, sir. He just broke away and ran. We can’t understand how he got in here, but he did.”

“Ah — yes. So I noticed,” Walton remarked drily. “See if he’s planning to assassinate anybody, will you?”

“Administrator Walton!” Prior protested. “I’m a man of peace! How can you accuse me of —”

One of the security men hit him. Walton stiffened and resisted the urge to reprimand the man. He was only doing his job, after all.

“Search him,” Walton said.

They gave Prior an efficient going-over. “He’s clean, Mr. Walton. Should we take him to security, or downstairs to health?”

“Neither. Leave him here with me.”

“Are you sure you —”

“Get out of here,” Walton snapped. As the three security men slinked away, he added, “And figure out some more efficient system for protecting me. Some day an assassin is going to sneak through here and get me. Not that I give a damn about myself, you understand; it’s simply that I’m indispensable. There isn’t another lunatic in the world who’d take this job. Now *get out!*”

They wasted no time in leaving. Walton waited until the door closed and jammed down hard on the lockstud. His tirade, he knew, was

wholly unjustified; if he had remembered to lock his door as regulations prescribed, Prior would never have broken in. But he couldn't admit that to the guards.

"Take a seat, Mr. Prior."

"I have to thank you for granting me this audience," Prior said, without a hint of sarcasm in his booming voice. "I realize you're a terribly busy man."

"I am." Another three inches of paper had deposited itself on Walton's desk since Prior had entered. "You're very lucky to have hit the psychological moment for your entrance. At any other time I'd have had you brigged for a month, but just now I'm in need of a little diversion. Besides, I very much admire your work, Mr. Prior."

"Thank you." Again that humility, startling in so big and commanding a man. "I hadn't expected to find — I mean that you —"

"That a bureaucrat should admire poetry? Is that what you're groping for?"

Prior reddened. "Yes," he admitted.

Grinning, Walton said, "I have to do *something* when I go home at night. I don't really read Popeek reports twenty-four hours a day. No more than twenty; that's my rule. I thought your last book was quite remarkable."

"The critics didn't," Prior said diffidently.

"Critics! What do they know?" Walton demanded. "They swing in cycles. Ten years ago it was form and technique, and you got the Melling Prize. Now it's message, political content that counts. That's not poetry, Mr. Prior — and there are still a few of us who recognize what poetry is. Take Yeats, for instance —"

Walton was ready to launch into a discussion of every poet from Prior back to Surrey and Wyatt; anything to keep from the job at

hand, anything to keep his mind from Popeek. But Prior interrupted him.

“Mr. Walton ...”

“Yes?”

“My son Philip ... he’s two weeks old now ...”

Walton understood. “No, Prior. Please don’t ask.” Walton’s skin felt cold; his hands, tightly clenched, were clammy.

“He was committed to Happysleep this morning — potentially tubercular. The boy’s perfectly sound, Mr. Walton. Couldn’t you —”

Walton rose. “No,” he said, half-commanding, half-pleading. “Don’t ask me to do it. I can’t make any exceptions, not even for you. You’re an intelligent man; you understand our program.”

“I voted for Popeek. I know all about Weeding the Garden and the Euthanasia Plan. But I hadn’t expected —”

“You thought euthanasia was a fine thing for *other* people. So did everyone else,” Walton said. “That’s how the act was passed.” Tenderly he said, “I can’t do it. I can’t spare your son. Our doctors give a baby every chance to live.”

“I was tubercular. They cured me. What if they had practiced euthanasia a generation ago? Where would my poems be now?”

It was an unanswerable question: Walton tried to ignore it.

“Tuberculosis is an extremely rare disease, Mr. Prior. We can wipe it out completely if we strike at those with TB-susceptible genetic traits.”

“Meaning you’ll kill any children I have?” Prior asked.

“Those who inherit your condition,” Walton said gently. “Go home, Mr. Prior. Bum me in effigy. Write a poem about me. But don’t ask me to do the impossible. I can’t catch any falling stars for you.”

Prior rose. He was immense, a hulking tragic figure staring broodingly at Walton. For the first time since the poet's abrupt entry, Walton feared violence. His fingers groped for the needle gun he kept in his upper left desk drawer.

But Prior had no violence in him. "I'll leave you," he said somberly. "I'm sorry, sir. Deeply sorry. For both of us."

Walton pressed the doorlock to let him out, then locked it again and slipped heavily into his chair. Three more reports slid out of the chute and landed on his desk. He stared at them as if they were three basilisks.

In the six weeks of Popeek's existence, three thousand babies had been ticketed for Happysleep, and three thousand sets of degenerate genes had been wiped from the race. Ten thousand subnormal males had been sterilized. Eight thousand dying oldsters had reached their graves ahead of time.

It was a tough-minded program. But why transmit palsy to unborn generations? Why let an adult idiot litter the world with subnormal progeny? Why force a man hopelessly cancerous to linger on in pain, consuming precious food?

Unpleasant? Sure. But the world had voted for it. Until Lang and his team succeeded in terraforming Venus, or until the faster-than-light outfit opened the stars to mankind, something had to be done about Earth's overpopulation. There were seven billion now and the figure was still growing.

Prior's words haunted him. *I was tubercular... where would my poems be now?*

The big humble man was one of the great poets. Keats had been tubercular too.

What good are poets? he asked himself savagely.

The reply came swiftly: *What good is anything, then?* Keats, Shakespeare, Eliot, Yeats, Donne, Pound, Matthews ... and Prior.

How much duller life would be without them, Walton thought, picturing his bookshelf — his one bookshelf, in his crowded little cubicle of a one-room home.

Sweat poured down his back as he groped toward his decision.

The step he was considering would disqualify him from his job if he admitted it, though he wouldn't do that. Under the Equalization Law, it would be a criminal act.

But just one baby wouldn't matter. Just one.

Prior's baby.

With nervous fingers he switched on the annunciator and said, "If there are any calls for me, take the message. I'll be out of my office for the next half-hour."

Chapter 2

HE STEPPED out of the office, glancing around furtively. The outer office was busy: half a dozen girls were answering calls, opening letters, coordinating activities. Walton slipped quickly past them into the hallway.

There was a knot of fear in his stomach as he turned toward the lift tube. Six weeks of pressure, six weeks of tension since Popeek was organized and old man FitzMaugham had tapped him for the second-in-command post ... and now, a rebellion. The sparing of a single child was a small rebellion, true, but he knew he was striking as effectively at the base of Popeek this way as if he had brought about repeal of the entire Equalization Law.

Well, just one lapse, he promised himself. I'll spare Prior's child, and after that I'll keep within the law.

He jabbed the lift tube indicator and the tube rose in its shaft. The clinic was on the twentieth floor.

"Roy."

At the sound of the quiet voice behind him, Walton jumped in surprise. He steadied himself, forcing himself to turn slowly. The director stood there.

"Good morning, Mr. FitzMaugham."

The old man was smiling serenely, his unlined face warm and friendly, his mop of white hair bright and full. "You look preoccupied, boy. Something the matter?"

Walton shook his head quickly. “Just a little tired, sir. There’s been a lot of work lately.”

As he said it, he knew how foolish it sounded. If anyone in Popeek worked harder than he did, it was the elderly director. FitzMaugham had striven for equalization legislature for fifty years, and now, at the age of eighty, he put in a sixteen-hour day at the task of saving mankind from itself.

The director smiled. “You never did learn how to budget your strength, Roy. You’ll be a worn-out wreck before you’re half my age. I’m glad you’re adopting my habit of taking a coffee break in the morning, though. Mind if I join you?”

“I’m — not taking a break, sir. I have some work to do downstairs.”

“Oh? Can’t you take care of it by phone?”

“No, Mr. FitzMaugham.” Walton felt as though he’d already been tried, drawn, and quartered. “It requires personal attention.”

“I see.” The deep, warm eyes bored into his. “You ought to slow down a little, I think.”

“Yes, sir. As soon as the work eases up a little.”

FitzMaugham chuckled. “In another century or two, you mean. I’m afraid you’ll never learn how to relax, my boy.”

The lift tube arrived. Walton stepped to one side, allowed the director to enter, and got in himself. FitzMaugham pushed *Fourteen*; there was a coffee shop down there. Hesitantly, Walton pushed twenty, covering the panel with his arm so the old man would be unable to see his destination.

As the tube began to descend, FitzMaugham said, “Did Mr. Prior come to see you this morning?”

“Yes,” Walton said.

“He’s the poet, isn’t he? The one you say is so good?”

“That’s right, sir,” Walton said tightly.

“He came to see me first, but I had him referred down to you. What was on his mind?”

Walton hesitated. “He — he wanted his son spared from Happysleep. Naturally, I had to turn him down.”

“Naturally,” FitzMaugham agreed solemnly. “Once we make even one exception, the whole framework crumbles.”

“Of course, sir.”

The lift tube halted and rocked on its suspension. The door slid back, revealing a neat, gleaming sign:

FLOOR 20

Euthanasia Clinic and Files

Walton had forgotten the accursed sign. He began to wish he had avoided traveling down with the director. He felt that his purpose must seem nakedly obvious now.

The old man’s eyes were twinkling amusedly. “I guess you get off here,” he said. “I hope you catch up with your work soon, Roy. You really should take some time off for relaxation each day.”

“I’ll try, sir.”

Walton stepped out of the tube and returned FitzMaugham’s smile as the door closed again. Bitter thoughts assailed him as soon as he was alone.

Some fine criminal you are. You’ve given the show away already! And damn that smooth paternal smile. FitzMaugham knows! He must know!

Walton wavered, then abruptly made his decision. He sucked in a deep breath and walked briskly toward the big room where the euthanasia files were kept.

The room was large, as rooms went nowadays — thirty by twenty, with deck upon deck of Donnerson micro-memory-tubes racked along one wall and a bank of microfilm records along the other. In six weeks of life Popeek had piled up an impressive collection of data.

While he stood there, the computer chattered, lights flashed. New facts poured into the memory banks. It probably went on day and night.

“Can I help — oh, it’s you, Mr. Walton,” a white-smocked technician said. Popeek employed a small army of technicians, each one faceless and without personality, but always ready to serve. “Is there anything I can do?”

“I’m simply running a routine checkup. Mind if I use the machine?”

“Not at all, sir. Go right ahead.”

Walton grinned lightly and stepped forward. The technician practically backed out of his presence.

No doubt I must radiate charisma, he thought. Within the building he wore a sort of luminous halo, by virtue of being Director FitzMaugham’s protégé and second-in-command. Outside, in the colder reality of the crowded metropolis, he kept his identity and Popeek rank quietly to himself.

Frowning, he tried to remember the Prior boy’s name. Ah ... Philip, wasn’t it? He punched out a request for the card on Philip Prior.

A moment’s pause followed, while the millions of tiny cryotronic circuits raced with information pulses, searching the Donnerson